



Ice Breaker

Ice Age was a huge success for Fox, but only because they accepted some cold hard facts about making cartoons.

WORDS: JAMES COTTEE

ICE AGE IS A BREAKTHROUGH MOVIE FOR FOX ANIMATION. IT'S AN

accessible tale full of likable characters. It embraces the very latest in realistic computer graphics, marrying them with the traditional mores of slapstick comedy. What's more, it brings a cast of accomplished actors and comedians to a child-friendly genre, to create a movie that can be appreciated by all.

These are great accomplishments, but one reason above all made *Ice Age* Fox's most fruitful animated movie ever. It made money. For years, 20th Century Fox has been trying to break into the lucrative animation business, with little success. Their most spectacular failure was *Titan A.E.*, a science fiction adventure that tried to embrace several demographics by mixing animation styles and technologies. Movie-goers stayed away in droves. Another box office disaster was *Monkeybone*, a sort of adults-only *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Brendan Fraser's star cachet wasn't enough to save *Monkeybone*, but then he couldn't save *Dudley Do-Right*, either.

It's not just Fox that's had a run of bad luck. Newcomers Dreamworks SKG have met limited success with *The Prince of Egypt* and *The Road to El Dorado*. Warner Bros released *The Iron Giant* to critical acclaim, only to have that touching tale drowned in a wave of *Pokemon*. Even Disney, the studio behind *The Little Mermaid*, which rejuvenated the animation genre, has been floundering of late. No sooner had the abortive *Hunchback of Notre Dame* stumbled onto store shelves, then the misguided aquatic adventure *Atlantis*, was baffling the handful that patronised its short cinematic run.

What's going on? Animation is a valid art-house genre in Europe, and in Japan appeals to every demographic under the rising sun. But American culture simply can't digest animation as anything

other than a tool for selling Happy Meals. Rupert Murdoch himself singled out the failure of Fox Animation to turn a buck, so as the *Ice Age* project formed, the heat was already on.

Chris Wedge wore several hats when putting together this pre-historic comedy. As the co-founder of Blue Sky Studios, the animation house behind *Ice Age*, he had hands-on knowledge of the technology involved. As director of the film, he had as much control as anyone on the project's formation. And bearing responsibility for the project's success, he was acutely aware of the pressure to conform.

"We were looking to make a movie for a broad audience. We have all had enough experience watching how other animated films perform. There was a great deal of pressure on us to appeal to a broad audience so we really did intend from the beginning to make a film that children and adults could enjoy together, and everybody in between. It might sound a little calculated, but it's not really because when you sit right down to make the movie the only audience you have is yourself and if it amuses you and your buddies, then you know you are on the right track."

For success in animated films, this translates into the old adage "less is more." For instance, the Japanese animated epic *Princess Mononoke* was the highest grossing film of all time in Japan, but in America it spectacularly bombed. It was even dubbed by the likes of Gillian Andersen. Its failure stemmed from aiming too high.

Chris Wedge learned as much from the early focus groups tests for *Ice Age*. "You can entertain the children with just about any visual gag or a funny looking character, or just by colours moving around on the screen. They just love the funny motion."

"If you have them speaking dialogue that's snappy and just kind of crackles with wit or sarcasm then the adults are on board and I think adults look for any excuse to watch animation, because I think we are all children inside. We are all looking for that kind of thrill."

It's standard practice in children's animation to make use of anthropomorphism – animals, or even inanimate objects, that act, think, and even talk like human beings. Adults may find it tiresome, but the

"I feel a change in the weather coming ..."



"I THINK ADULTS LOOK FOR ANY EXCUSE TO WATCH ANIMATION"

kids love it, and Wedge set out to take *Ice Age* to the anthropomorphic extreme. "I thought it would be interesting to have it with the humans, we would be on the animal's side so you don't really know what is going on in the human's head, if ever. I wanted to treat them like they were part of a nature movie. We can hear mumbles but we don't hear them say anything, we don't really get involved with their personalities."

It's a theme that extends even beyond the living, breathing characters. "I felt that if we were going to make a movie about the Ice Age that the Ice Age itself should be a character. We decide the best way to do

that was to send it up against one of the animals you might find there. So we came up with the helpless scrat." The scrat, a strange, sabre-toothed rodent creature, is the only mute animal in the cast. His slapstick misadventures periodically intersect the dialogue in one of the few fragments of innovation the filmmakers allowed themselves.

Ultimately, making *Ice Age* a success hinged on making the story accessible. Producer Lori Forte was ex-Disney, having worked on *Toy Story* and *The Lion King*. Her C.V. runs all the way back to *Alf* in the 1980s, and her mission brief was simple: "A story about the

TECH SUPPORT

How fake imagery brings us closer to reality ...

Our technology savvy readers will be familiar with a little rule of Information technology called Moore's Law. Simply put, it means that every 18 months computing power will double.

It explains how videogames have jumped from *Pac-Man* to *Halo* in a few short years. *Toy Story* looks antique by today's standards, and even *Shrek* is beginning to look dated. With limitless computing power at our fingertips, the problem becomes not how to get that crucial animation horsepower, but what to do with it.

Animation director Chris Wedge explains: "A lot of what makes *Ice Age* different has to do with the technology that we have developed at Blue Sky, and a lot of it has to do with our own instincts about the design. Some of it has to do with the pressures that our schedule and budget forces us to



simplify some things. But what we tried to come up with was a film that was stylised so that visually the characters would be the most prominent element on the screen.

"Then the environments were designed so they would never upstage the characters. I'm not kidding, but theoretical physicists on our staff have analyzed the way that light works and created or simulated a virtual environment along with other reflections and refraction and shadows. It gave our imagery an extra level of visual complexity that makes the movie seem more natural."

The technology used to create the jaw-dropping



visuals in *Ice Age* has been known to computer scientists for years, but only recently has it been feasible to harness it. "Ray Tracing simulates the complexities of real light, mimicking the matrix of colours and shadow that we experience all the time in the real world. It's a kind of digital cinematography that lets us use our computers like a photographer uses a camera, making everything on screen look more compelling and tangible."

Character designer Peter deSeve had to take these tools and create a world of long extinct fauna. Each creature had its own set of kinks to work out thanks to their alien physiology. "The fur increases



THE DVD COMETH ... and it is mammoth

Fox have pulled out all the stops with the *Ice Age* special edition DVD. If Disney went monster for its *Monsters, Inc.* then Fox have simply gone mammoth.

Not only are there the usual commentaries, but you also get six deleted scenes, a look behind the technology that put the movie together and, best of all, a multi-angle comparison of various sequences in the movie.

You also get another short, *Scrat's New Adventure*, plus commentary pieces specifically looking at scenes featuring Sid, and a quite amazing 400 - yep, we said 400 - images in an interactive character gallery. Available on October 16.

first dysfunctional family." Chris Wedge took that concept a little further, refining the concept into "Three Prehistoric Mammals and a Baby." Together they were able to create something entirely new, yet somewhat unoriginal.

It's a little known fact, but ice ages are actually the status quo of planet Earth's climate. They rage for tens of thousands of years, occasionally receding to let the Northern Hemisphere bloom. It's almost a metaphor for creative experimentation in the animation business. Glaciers of cold consumerism bury more imaginative projects with the certainty of the lowest common denominator. Bold new genres may emerge, but like the sabre-tooths and mammoths, are doomed to perish in the cold.

Ice Age is a great movie. But it plays it safe. You can't blame Fox - anyone who makes an animated feature these days is skating on thin ice.



the level of detail needed to render the image. A woolly mammoth isn't simply an elephant with long hair, so we were working with a creature that has never appeared in animated form. We had to decide how the fur falls, the shape of the tendrils, and figure out a lot of new shape relationships."

Underneath all the faux fur and atmospheric haze, computer animation is a process that still needs to be guided by human hands. Computer effects are gaining favour, but even Wedge admits the old animation arts aren't dead yet. "We'd often go back to pencil for fast feedback. It's immediate and allowed us to convey certain emotions."



When animals could speak, and humans were dumb.



Prehistoric pals.